October is the month for political rallies, temperature changes and fresh citrus. As winter residents return from their northern homes, many are concerned about things that are happening to their prize citrus trees.

Crinkled leaves at the tips of branches cause alarm, but are not a serious threat to tree health. Citrus leaf miners or aphids may cause the damage. Look closely at the leaves for hints of the cause of the problem. Aphids and leaf miners damage the young tender leaves and are often noticed following a growth flush when new leaves are formed in spring summer and fall.

Leaf miners are small insects that mine and feed between the layers of the leaf. Look for silvery splotches on young leaves where the thin surface tissues separate as the insect burrows through the leaf. Brown irregular lines in the leaf are another clue of leaf miner damage.

Since the insects are inside the leaf, chemical controls are mostly ineffective. This is a "grin and bear it" problem which is not a matter of life or death. University of Florida researchers have found a tiny parasitic wasp that feeds on the insect and naturally reduces the problem. To encourage the wasp, avoid chemical sprays.

Aphids are small soft-bodied sucking pests that also feed on tender new leaves. The green or brown insects are often found clustered on shoot tips. Once injured, leaves deform and usually twist or curl under. A forceful jet of water may be enough to dislodge the insects and interrupt their damage. Damage is rarely severe enough to warrant chemical sprays.

Fruit splitting and fruit drop are two problems which also appear this time of year. Beetles and fruit flies are often found in split or fallen fruit but are not the cause of the fruit problem.

Fruit splitting is related to inconsistent soil moisture and cannot be corrected this season. During dry weather, peel growth slows and toughens. When rains begin or irrigation is resumed, the inner juice sacs swell with juice and expand. The tough peel cannot expand and instead splits. If you are noticing a large number of fruit splitting, consider watering the plants during dry weather once the fruit set in the spring. A good soaking once a week during time of no rainfall should prevent the problem next fall.

Fruit drop as another problem related to plant stress. The tree has the ability to support a certain amount of fruit based on the amount of healthy leaves and adequate plant nutrition. There is normally some fruit drop when we start our summer rains in June and then again just as fruit begin to mature. Be sure to fertilize citrus for good health and best fruit production.

While general-purpose plant fertilizers will provide nutrients for tree growth and fruiting, citrus specials are formulated to include small but necessary quantities of calcium, magnesium, manganese, boron and copper.

Rate recommendations vary, but a good rule of thumb for large trees is to apply about one pound of citrus fertilizer per year of age of the tree each time you fertilize, up to 10 pounds per application. If you are unsure of the age, apply one pound per foot of height up to 10 pounds. Mature trees can be fertilized spring, summer and fall. Use the growth flush cycle as a reminder to fertilize. Large trees would get a maximum of 30 pounds of citrus fertilizer per year split into 3 applications in March, June and September.

Young trees are rapidly growing and benefit from more frequent applications in smaller amounts. The fruit quality is not very good from young trees that benefit from slightly higher rates to promote rapid
size development. For example, a newly planted tree would not need fertilizer for at least a month after planting, and then use about three-quarters of a pound applied every 4 to 6 weeks. Fact sheet, HS 884, Florida Dooryard Citrus Guide - Introduction, describes a fertilizer schedule for young trees through their 5th year of growth.

When applying fertilizer to citrus and other plants, it is important to sprinkle it evenly on the soil surface away from the trunk and out past the spread of the branches. Water to dissolve the chemical fertilizer into the soil where it is available to plant roots.

If you encounter something unusual with your plants, suppress the urge to spray it away. First identify the problem and the cause, then determine if any action is necessary. If you are unsure of the problem, contact the Master Gardeners at the University of Florida’s Osceola County Extension Office. Master Gardeners are on duty Monday to Friday from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. to help you with a variety of plant care questions. If these times are not convenient, samples can be dropped off for identification through a follow-up phone call. Call (321) 697-3000 or contact them by email at epabon5@ufl.edu. Check out other consumer horticulture information on our web site at http://osceola.ifas.ufl.edu.

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